

VZCZCXRO7969
RR RUEHROV
DE RUEHROV #0044/01 0452022
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 142022Z FEB 07
FM AMEMBASSY VATICAN
INFO RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 0104
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0690

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000044

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DEPT FOR G/IWI, EUR/EX LARREAJ, EUR/EX DUGGANJ

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KWMN](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: WOMAN OF COURAGE" - SR. EUGENIA BONETTI - ANTI-TRAFFICKING
IN PERSONS CRUSADER ITALIAN UNION OF MAJOR SUPERIORS (USMI)

¶1. Sr. Eugenia Bonetti, 67, is a Consolata Missionary sister and director of the anti-trafficking in persons (TIP) office of the Italian Union of Major Superiors (USMI), the umbrella organization for thousands of nuns throughout Italy. Her remarkable courage and commitment to fighting the injustice suffered by thousands of women is fueled by her 24 years as a missionary in Kenya, where she worked with women and children in schools and parishes, and 15 years in Italy, where she began working in Turin with immigrants and refugees - many of them young Nigerian women, victims of human trafficking.

¶2. With clear vision and strong leadership, Sr. Eugenia addressed the phenomenon of trafficking in persons early on. In 1997, she was awarded an MA from the Missionary Institute of London with a thesis entitled "A 20th Century Slave Trade, Breaking the Chains of Forced Prostitution." The paper drew heavily upon her research with nearly 3,000 Nigerian women living and working in the northern industrial town of Turin. Due to her deep understanding of social justice and human right issues, she was transferred to USMI headquarters in Rome in ¶2000.

¶3. Since that time, Sr. Eugenia has built a network of nuns who serve on the frontlines of the life-and-death battle against trafficking in persons - offering material security, shelter, and pastoral care to thousands of its victims. The network includes some 250 sisters from 70 congregations who operate 100 shelters throughout Italy and provide for the protection, rehabilitation and social reintegration of victims. Sr. Eugenia describes their work and ministry:

"The Sisters try to find a response to the life-threatening situation of so many women and girls, imported and exported worldwide for the sex market. When girls managed to escape from their pimps and asked us nuns for help, many different convents took a considerable and unknown risk in sheltering these girls. Having listened to their startling stories, the Sisters soon understood that 'working as a prostitute' was not a free choice. They were victims of a modern form of slavery. This was a challenge to our norms and values, to our traditions, as well as to our very safety. But we continued."

¶4. Under the direction of Sr. Eugenia, the Italian Sisters - and hundreds of others around the globe - respond to the extreme challenges the trafficking phenomenon presents. At night, Sr. Eugenia and a group of volunteers fearlessly walk the via Salaria and other main thoroughfares of the capital and countryside, talking with the girls they come across, forced to prostitute themselves by pimps in the shadows. On Saturday mornings, Sr. Eugenia and her team of 14 nuns - representing 8 different nationalities and speaking as many languages - can be found at the Ponte Galeria Temporary Detention Center, offering pastoral care and kindness to the nearly 180 women inmates (many of them victims of trafficking) awaiting forced repatriation, the majority arrested for not possessing official documents

(systematically stolen by their traffickers).

¶5. In 2004, Sr. Eugenia, in conjunction with the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See, the UISG and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) conducted training courses for 87 religious sisters on the theoretical, practical and spiritual aspects of human trafficking. Courses took place in Italy, Nigeria, Albania and Romania. Similar courses involving the training of women religious were also carried out in Thailand, Santo Domingo, Brazil, the Philippines and Portugal. In January 2007, Sr. Eugenia led a training program in Nairobi, Kenya, for 25 nuns coming from eight African countries.

¶6. In recent years, Sr. Eugenia's efforts have been aimed not only at victims of this modern-day slavery. She has brought pressure to bear on members of parliament, non-governmental and faith-based organizations, as well as male religious orders, which she has vociferously encouraged to address the client aspect of the phenomenon. Above all, she and her team of Sisters demonstrate to other religious orders that religious life in the third millennium demands putting an end to the international trafficking of women and girls. This is, says Sr. Eugenia, "the actualization of the charism of religious congregations - men and women - in our day." Her clarion call has prompted religious orders and the Vatican to take notice and initiatives.

¶7. Sr. Eugenia collaborates with the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace Working Group on Trafficking in Women and Children UISG/USG (Union of International Women Superiors General / Union of Men Superiors General) and Caritas Internationalis. They have prepared a set of informative pamphlets on the issue for use by religious communities, seminaries, schools, parishes and youth groups. The kit is available in six languages: English, Italian, Spanish, French, Polish and Romanian; a Portuguese and German version are in preparation.

¶8. Further afield, Sr. Eugenia strategizes with several

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conferences of women religious and various other faith-based organizations to leverage alliances and resources in countries of origin, transit and destination. In a unique collaboration with the Nigerian Conference of Women Religious (NCWR), Sr. Eugenia has encouraged local efforts in the remotest and poorest of communities to prevent trafficking, reconnect and protect families of victims, and assist in the rehabilitation of repatriated victims. She has also provided vision and counsel to a TIP shelter initiative in Benin City for those victims forcefully repatriated from Italy. The shelter - a first of its kind - has been financed by the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) and is expected to open its doors in May 2007.

¶9. In 2004, Sr. Eugenia was named as one of six "Heroes Acting to End Modern-Day Slavery" in the annual TIP Report published by the U.S. Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. On International Women's Day in 2006, she was made a Commendatore (Knight-Commander) of the Italian Order of Merit by then-President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi for her work on trafficking in persons.

¶10. Of her dedication to eradicating trafficking in persons, one of the most pressing issues of our day, affecting millions of the world's most vulnerable people each year, Sr. Eugenia says:

"I have heard the cry for help of the victims and came to understand their deep suffering and humiliation in being forced to become "prostitutes." As a woman and as a missionary, I felt offended and indignant to see the life of so many young people, dreaming for a better future, destroyed for futile interests. In a special way, I joined with other women religious who have been moved by such circumstances to open the "holy doors" of their convents to hide and protect women running away from their torturers. Fifteen years ago some daring women religious planted a small seed. They were women concerned with human rights and the dignity of so many women 'created in the image of God but treated as slaves.' That tiny seed has grown into a big tree."

¶11. In conferences, reports, words and deeds from America to Canada, Eastern Europe, Africa and other countries around the globe, Sr. Eugenia is shining a bright light on the scourge of trafficking in persons and the critical role religious women -and men-can play in bringing about an end to it. She is truly a woman of courage, as well as a symbol of hope and human dignity to so many women who have had theirs robbed from them.
SANDROLINI